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## Barack Obama: Crisis and Leadership

Alaina Love analyzes the President's first-year performance and outlines what he needs to do—and watch out for—to become a more effective leader

By [Alaina Love](#)

The first year of President Barack Obama's tenure has been marked by a series of unrelenting crises requiring a steady flow of adrenaline. Obama is front and center in a firestorm of partisan politics. With the added pressure of being the U.S.'s first African American President, he is fighting for the survival of the hopes and aspirations that brought him to office just 12 months ago.

Evaluating Obama's performance must be done through the framework of crisis leadership, where the test of great leaders is not merely what they do in times of crisis, but also who they become as a result of struggle. Clearly, Obama can't yet be judged on the latter point. Not since World War II has any U.S. President faced as many concurrent challenges, let alone one with stakes as great: an imperiled global economy; two wars in the Middle East; a political maelstrom that constrains progress on critical domestic issues; terrorist threats to airline safety; and recently, a natural disaster of horrific proportion in neighboring Haiti that has refocused the eyes of the world on Obama's Presidency and the U.S. response to yet another crisis.

When I [wrote about Obama](#) shortly after his inauguration, I characterized him as demonstrating three passions: the Healer, the Transformer and the Conceiver. (Please note: I have never worked with Obama, so my characterization of his passion archetypes is based on my extensive research on passion, coupled with my observations about the President.) Healers deeply feel the pain of others and work to alleviate suffering; Transformers thrive in the chaos of change and uncertainty while helping others navigate the winding road to a better place; and Conceivers enjoy exploring new concepts and pushing past old boundaries of thought to discover powerful new possibilities.

Events of the last year have called upon all three passions in large measure and have required a crisis leader who possesses the essential skills of intelligence, influence, courage, vision, and a commitment to communicating with the nation and beyond. So let's look at how the President has applied both his skills and passions, how he has evolved through crisis, and what aspects of his leadership need improvement.

### Economic Collapse

Upon entering office last January, Obama found a fractured financial system and a world economy sliding into an abyss. His Administration developed and delivered a plan to pull the U.S. back from the edge of financial collapse, employing the stimulus package as one part of that plan. While maligned on both sides of the aisle as either insufficient or too expensive, the stimulus was quickly enacted and by the fall of 2009, the precipitous rise in unemployment had been arrested (although unemployment hasn't gotten any better) and gross domestic product improved. Still, there is much to be done. Obama's passion as a Conceiver, characterized by a predisposition toward out-of-the-box thinking and a desire to develop new solutions, will be an essential quality as he works to right our economy and stimulate sustained job growth in 2010.

### Banking Collapse

President Obama found his Administration in a fight to rescue banks and responded by implementing TARP, with a stress-test process for 19 large financial institutions. Currently, all 19 are still operating, and many have repaid TARP funds. Obama and the Federal Reserve deserve credit for averting a banking collapse. However, an argument could be made that Obama ought to have taken a stronger position on huge bonuses paid to leaders in organizations reaping the benefit of public funds.

I believe that the President learned from this experience and began demanding the accountability taxpayers deserve. In line with his Healer passion, Obama voiced frustration with how banks took advantage of unsuspecting borrowers and sent thousands of American homeowners into foreclosure. To maintain credibility as a leader, he will have to follow through on banking reforms to prevent a recurrence of questionable practices that could further compromise the economy.

### Health-Care Reform

One of the most controversial issues on President Obama's agenda—and perhaps the one with the greatest potential

to define his legacy—is getting health-care reform passed. Obama has been vigorously challenged on his position by opponents to the bill and had to backtrack on the so-called public option in an effort to get it passed. He came into office having run on a platform of change, with a commitment to transform politics in America and reach across the aisle for co-created solutions.

The battle to reform health care has tested Obama's courage of conviction, his passion for healing, and his ability to influence. A defining objective of 2010 should be building a team out of the collection of legislators bickering on Capitol Hill, and the challenges--and stakes--are amplified by the Democrats' loss of the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy's seat to the Republicans.

### **Two Wars**

As the war in Iraq continued, Obama—who had run on an antiwar platform—wrestled with a request for more troops in Afghanistan. By not immediately pulling out of Iraq or quickly refusing to send more troops, Obama compromised his credibility with his antiwar supporters. After a three-month analysis of the situation, Obama decided to commit 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. Where I think Obama fell short was not in the decision he ultimately made, but in his infrequent communications to the public on the matter.

When he at last announced his decision, Obama engaged in a dialogue with the American people about the imperative of taking action, a conversation that would have been more effective had it been conducted weeks earlier. In times of crisis, or when circumstances demand a reversal of espoused positions, people need to hear the unfiltered reasoning directly from their leader sooner.

President Obama's reviews are mixed on being an effective leader against global terrorism. He has ordered weekly drone strikes on terrorist suspects in Pakistan, which have killed roughly 500 militants, yet he has failed to deliver on the promise to close Guantanamo. He has found himself in the peculiar position of being viewed as both dove and hawk on issues of national defense. Helping the public understand his position will be crucial to generating the needed support for Obama's military decisions in 2010. Again, the leadership traits of communication, influence, and courage will be called upon.

### **Domestic Terrorism**

When the Christmas Day bombing attempt in the skies above Detroit made an accidental hero of Joseph Shuringa, who wrestled the terrorist to submission, Obama's direct response to the American people was slow in coming. On vacation when the event happened, the President weighed in with a personal address several days later. While it is not surprising that managing constant crises could numb even the most seasoned leader, it would have served the President better to address the people sooner. Obama's challenge in 2010 will be to ward off the numbness that so many crises can evoke.

### **Foreign Relations**

A hallmark of Obama's first year in office has been his outreach to foreign nations in an effort to heal frayed relations and strengthen the U.S.'s global footing. His campaign promises about healing international relations were acted upon as he visited more countries in his first year in office than any of his predecessors. Respected for his intelligence, vision, and desire to transform U.S. foreign relations, Obama has been warmly received abroad by crowds and political leaders. Last summer, after polling 24 countries, the Pew Research Center noted that opinions of the U.S. are now as positive as they were prior to the Bush Administration.

In an unprecedented moment during a freshman Presidency—and to the surprise of many, including himself—Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Recognizing that he leads a country embroiled in two wars, he acknowledged the need to balance the ongoing quest for peace with the imperatives of war with an enemy that is not open to reason. As his leadership tenure progresses, Obama will have much to live up to in fulfilling the promise of this remarkable award while addressing an evil that left unchecked, puts the U.S. and its allies in jeopardy.

Given the recent earthquake in Haiti, Obama will once again be judged globally for his leadership, both in the days and weeks following the earthquake and as he devises a long-term strategy for the U.S. role in rebuilding and strengthening Haiti's economy. His early-stage request to have former President George W. Bush and Bill Clinton take a lead in relief and rebuilding efforts was a good start, as was the sending of aid and troops to Port au Prince.

In light of the extraordinary challenges of Obama's first year, I would rate his overall performance a solid B, while giving him an A in courage for tackling so many thorny issues simultaneously. As his Presidency matures, he will need to manage the vulnerability of his passions so that they don't derail him. As a Transformer, Obama may tend to push change too quickly, beyond the capacity of others to accept. As a Conceiver, he is an intellectual acrobat who thrives in the question as much as the answer and may over-deliberate issues. As a Healer, Obama may forfeit the time needed to recharge himself to the point of burnout in deference to the nation's needs.

Regardless of the mammoth complexities of his Presidency, it is fair to say that Obama has demonstrated the capacity to learn, grow, and overcome adversity. These are critical traits for leading in a crisis and even more essential attributes in a leader of the free world.

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